

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue *Sacred Heritage: Religions and Material Culture*

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In recent years, studies dedicated to relations between “religion” and “heritage” have apparently shifted from questions concerned with the dichotomy and tensions between these two domains (see [Meyer and de Witte 2013](#)) towards a scrutinization of their complex entanglements and not so clear cut boundaries (see e.g., [Isnart and Cerezales 2020](#); [Gilchrist 2020](#)). This shift is strongly influenced by a wider scholarly debate about “religion” which has been invigorated, in particular, by Talal Asad’s weighty analyses of the history and contextual nature of this category ([Asad 1993](#)) and his emphasis on the interdependence between what is seen and practiced as “sacred” and “secular” ([Asad 2003](#)). Thinking *through* blurring boundaries rather than focusing on binary oppositions stimulated new theorizations in the study of religion and deepened scholarly explorations of religious practices, lived experiences and theological discourses in various global and local circumstances.

For example, pilgrimage studies have thoughtfully juggled with the categories of “pilgrims” and “tourists”. Once interpreted as referring to totally different groups, the boundaries between them are seen today as porous and mingling. As categories, they appear to refer to different uses and contexts and are variously interpreted by a broad spectrum of socio-cultural actors (see [Eade and Coleman 2004](#); [Coleman and Bowman 2019](#); [Baraniecka-Olszewska 2024](#)). In a similar vein, anthropologists and human geographers, who have focused on the study of space and spatiality, have questioned the obviousness of the sacred–profane dichotomy and have revealed its unstable entanglements with various understandings of “place”, “space”, “landscape”, “boundary”, “borderland” or “frontier” (see [Tweed 2006](#); [Knott 2008](#); [Knott 2010](#); [Maddrell et al. 2015](#); [Niedźwiedz and Baraniecka-Olszewska 2020](#); [Bielo and Ron 2023](#)).

Another set of examples might be drawn from research dedicated to sacred things and objects, like icons and images, relics and offerings. Numerous anthropologists, archeologists and art historians have focused on the importance of materiality in religious practice, rather than on a material–spiritual divide (see [Freedberg 1989](#); [Morgan 2010](#); [Houtman and Meyer 2012](#)). In sociology and cultural anthropology, the lived religion approach promotes in-depth analysis and context-sensitive studies of the practical, material, sensual, emotional and embodied aspects of religions. The material–spiritual opposition is now usually seen as inherited from a specific reading of particular religious traditions (especially Judeo-Christian) and European intellectual elite philosophical trajectories.

Looking from a broader perspective, one can see that the academic criticism and contextualization of the term “religion” has happened alongside a development of secularization and post-secularization theories, the emergence of “spirituality” as a new heuristic category recognized as useful in descriptions of contemporary “Western” societies, and postcolonial and decolonial studies inspired by various continental and cultural perspectives. Recognizing these complex itineraries allows us to map the current state of the debate about “religion(s)” and elucidates how this debate influences our understanding of those elements which are seen or described as “religious” heritage(s).



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Studies of heritage, on the other hand, have also gone through a particular development which needs to be considered when we analyze a present-day religious heritage nexus. In the second half of the 20th century, in public domains all over the world, the term “heritage” was originally connected with the institutionalization of global discourses about heritage implemented by UNESCO (Cameron 2016). UNESCO’s policies were quickly mimicked by numerous state, regional and local bodies dedicated to “heritage protection”. To understand the political, social and economic dynamics behind the “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006, p. 29) and formation of heritage beyond institutional management, numerous scholars turned towards a critical approach in heritage studies (Smith 2012; Harrison 2013; Saleminink 2021). It was observed that UNESCO-ization not only influenced institutional but also bottom-up heritage formation practices and popular understandings of the term “heritage”.

Further reflections on the “heritage boom” (Macdonald 2013, p. 2) or “heritage buzz” (van de Port and Meyer 2018, p. 7) turned towards studies on processual and contextual dimensions of heritage and the involvement of senses, bodies, spaces, landscapes, material objects, and architecture, as well as affects and emotions, in its production. This developing field focusses on relations between institutional and bottom-up understandings and uses of heritage as well as global and local heritage discourses, not only investigating their convergences but also contestations and conflicting standpoints.

Furthermore, critical heritage studies examine the non-static and political character of the authorized heritage discourse and the heritage regimes connected with it (de Cesari 2013). The formation, dissemination and changes in authorized heritage discourse reveal power relations and inter-cultural negotiations. For instance, comparative analysis of the 1972 *UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* and the 2003 *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* illustrates the institutional transformation in the understanding of the term “heritage”. During the last thirty years, UNESCO’s conventions have expanded from “protecting” and “preserving” “heritage as material (tangible), monumental, grand, ‘good’, aesthetic and of universal value” (Smith and Akagawa 2009, p. 3) towards more processual understandings of what heritage can be in various cultural settings and for various groups of people.

While many anthropologists might be skeptical about the emphasis on the term “intangible” pointing to the centrality of material and sensual aspects in any “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills” (UNESCO Convention 2003), it must be admitted that the UNESCO official documents and the concept of “intangible cultural heritage” have signaled an institutional openness towards the dynamic nature of social life and human experiences. Apparently, it is not without significance that in critical heritage studies the term “living heritage” appeared as a response to a growing research interest in grassroot movements and the personal emotional involvement with variously identified “heritages” or “legacies”. Importantly, the concept of “intangible heritage”, globally introduced by UNESCO, certainly resonates with what is seen as “spiritual” and encourages heritage labeling of a growing number of religious practices in various parts of the world and representing various traditions.

Returning to the discussion about the relationship between religion and heritage, it might help to make a few observations derived from the intellectual trajectories described above. Firstly, as we have seen, studies of religion and heritage were formed in a Western academic environment, which also meant specific political and institutional power relations connected with dominant discourses and understandings of their key concepts. Secondly, institutional and grassroots discourses about religion(s) and heritage(s) are usually much more interconnected (in many subtle ways) than one might conclude when approaching them in terms of a simple top-down, one-way transfer. Finally, the latest destabilization and contextualization of the terms “religion” and “heritage” in scholarly debates reflect attempts to decolonize academic language as well as a broader quest for a more adequate analysis and description of the paradoxical and “messy” character of human lives in their individual and communal dimensions in various geographical and historical contexts.

Interestingly, the growing popularity of the “lived religion” approach in anthropology, sociology and religious studies as well as emergence of the concept of “living heritage” in critical heritage studies seems to reflect these quests.

In this Special Issue, some authors use lived religion as an important starting point for their discussions on religious–heritage entanglements. In the article by Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, for instance, the religious experiences of Polish Roman Catholics are analyzed as practices connected with the production and reproduction of heritage framed as simultaneously religious *and* national. Baraniecka-Olszewska focuses on commemorative celebrations of the 1920 battle between Polish and Bolshevik armies and emphasizes the “adjacency” of religion and heritage (see [Coleman and Bowman 2019](#)), revealing how lived religion can create a conducive environment for living heritage. She also aptly notes that religious institutions, such as the Roman Catholic Church, can competently utilize heritage discourses and intertwine them with theological language and religious activities.

The dynamic and performative aspects of both religion and heritage are also the focus of Dorota Zaprzalska’s study of the practices and meanings connected with the Panagia icon kept in the Amirou Monastery in Cyprus. Ethnographic material collected by the author as well as historical sources reveal the process of mutual entanglement between religion and heritage, which leads to the strengthening of ascribed spiritual powers and cultural importance associated with the Panagia Amirou icon. Various actors participate in this process, and Zaprzalska draws on assemblage theory to map this multilayered and fluctuating network. This approach seems very fruitful, as the religious–heritage assemblage she studies involves not only a religious community, various individuals and institutions but also an icon with its materiality and agency.

The material aspect of lived religion in the context of heritagization is discussed in the paper on the Africanization of Catholicism in Ghana. Anna Niedźwiedź reveals how religions and heritages were variously defined and redefined in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The paper emphasizes the importance of lived experiences and introduces the concept of “embodied continuity” to depict the significance of non-discursive knowledge and bodily practices in grounding contemporary African Christian identity in the spiritual and religious past of the continent.

While in Niedźwiedź’s paper materiality is lived and strongly connected with corporeal practices of Ghanaian Catholics, in Cyril Isnart’s paper, the main focus is on material objects which function as part of an exhibition. The synagogue in Tomar (Portugal) and a collection of Hebrew stone inscriptions is identified as an example of a “religious–heritage complex” ([Isnart and Cerezales 2020](#)). Isnart scrutinizes the relationship between exhibited objects and the space of the synagogue (used not for religious but for museum purposes). The article also reveals the role that both individual curators and state politics play in the museum’s practices.

The last paper in the Special Issue also refers to what might be called “museumification” but in a very different context. Irene Stengs works around the dramatic rescue of a Thai youth football team from a flooded cave in 2018. This relatively recent and widely publicized incident is analyzed as a “high density event”. As such, the rescue and its public media cover reveal the potential to materialize collective emotions and generate heritage that has emerged in the form of various memorial sites, exhibitions and material objects. Stengs describes a process of “instantaneous heritagization”, where heritage formation can channel emotions as well as spiritual and religious interpretations, which accompany high density events like the one she analyses.

All five contributions to the Special Issue are built around particular case studies. Referring to broader theoretical debates about the religious–heritage nexus which I briefly described in the first part of this *Introduction*, all the authors use qualitative methods and ethnographic approaches to present detailed and dense descriptions of the situations on the ground. Lived religion and living heritage approaches emphasize the changing nature of both “religion” and “heritage” as well as the involvement of various actors in the processes of heritagization and sacralization. Material objects, particular spaces and

people's emotional and sensual bodies are actively involved in these processes and must be taken seriously if we want to grasp the multivocality and plurality of what is seen or experienced as "sacred heritage". It is also very interesting to observe that universalizing discourses on heritage promoted by UNESCO and Western-centric conceptualizations of religion have their—probably at least to some extent—global influence. However, this also means that these discourses are transformed and often challenged when linked to practices performed in various parts of the world and to material culture produced by various communities within settings which might be framed as "religious", "heritage", or both. Thinking through religious–heritage complexities, assemblages and adjacencies allows us to grasp this dynamic diversity and appreciate an active involvement of materiality (be it through objects, bodily sensations or embodied practices) in the production of the socio-cultural worlds people inhabit.

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